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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is the politics and practicalities of using, training, and paying young people as peer researchers in their schools. It begins by presenting a five-point rationale for involving peer researchers in research about young people. The paper also discusses the ethics and politics of negotiating peer research in four New Zealand secondary schools, in particular the issue of payment for peer researchers. Two sections follow that focus on the relevance of research about students' rights to the nine peer researchers who worked on the project and their perceptions of the relevance of a peer research methodology. The paper includes an analysis of the quality of the data collected from the perspective of education researchers. The conclusion revisits the five-point rationale in light of what peer researchers had to say about their research experiences. (Contains 28 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Young people as researchers in schools: the possibilities of peer research

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the politics and practicalities of employing, training and paying young people as peer researchers in their schools. We begin by presenting a five point rationale for involving peer researchers in research about young people. We discuss the ethics and politics of negotiating peer research in four New Zealand secondary schools and in particular the issue of payment for peer researchers. Two sections follow that focus on the relevance of research about students' rights to the peer researchers who worked on the project and their perceptions of the relevance of a peer research methodology. We include an analysis of the 'quality' of the data collected from our perspectives as education researchers. In the conclusion we revisit our five point rationale in the light of what peer researchers had to say about their research experiences.

Introduction

In a broader research project about high school students' rights, namely their participation, safety, health and recreation rights, it seemed important to find ways to model participation rights in the research process. A peer research component was therefore developed as an opportunity for young people to have roles in shaping the research process, particularly data collection and collation. Peer research is defined as young people conducting research with their peers, i.e. other young people.

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Our rationale for involving peer researchers was informed by five arguments. First, in a project about young people's participation rights, the research process should ideally provide models for and facilitate young people's participation (Alderson, 2000). There are a number of Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) that promote young people's participation rights; these include their rights to be consulted and taken account of, to freedom of speech and opinion, and to be involved in decisions that affect them (Lansdown 1994). Peer research was one way of taking account of young people's participation rights.[1] Second, research shows that "youth respondents feel more at ease and give better responses to interviewers from their own peer group" (Victorian Youth Advocacy Network 1990, cited in Alder and Sandor 1990: 38). Third, the strategic valuing of young people's research skills recognises that they are in the process of gaining such skills while at school and extends their skill base by providing work on a research project.[2] Fourth, it "is a form of political action – the potential of peer research projects to shift dominant stereotypes about young people should not be underestimated" (Hill 1994, cited in Kaplun 1995: 9). Finally, "the strongest rationale for employing youth researchers has to do with the benefits that accrue to the youth researchers themselves" (Alder and Sandor 1990: 38) and we proposed that these would include communication, organisational, interviewing and observational skills. While all of these are strong arguments for including peer researchers in research about and with young people, the purpose of this article is to critically assess the politics as well as the possibilities of peer research.

[1] See Taylor, Smith and Nairn (2001) for a discussion of the importance of participation rights to young people.

[2] The project was called 'Constructions of Young People's Participation, Health, Safety and Recreational Rights at Secondary School' and was supported by the Marsden Fund administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand. The research project included two distinct research phases. The first was concerned with gaining a broad picture of student and staff constructions of young people's rights at school, and to achieve this, a nation-wide survey was conducted towards the end of 1999. The second phase which began in 2001, was more qualitative in approach, and included peer research, focus group interviews with student-only and staff-only groups, and one-to-one interviews with the principal or senior administrators in four case study schools.

The peer research methodology was employed in four New Zealand secondary schools selected as case studies (Stake 1995). These four schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria: co-educational or single-sex; socio-economic status of school catchment (in New Zealand this is indicated by a school's decile rating)[3]; urban or rural; and included two schools from the North Island and two from the South Island. The four schools have been given code names to reflect these respective criteria; North Urban Co-ed 1; North Urban Boys 10; South Urban Girls 6 and South Rural Co-ed 4 (decile 1 being the lowest indicating a school population generally from families on very low incomes, decile 10 being the highest indicating a school population generally from families on very high incomes).

We begin by briefly outlining our theoretical framework. Next we describe and critically assess the politics and practicalities of negotiating entry to four schools, recruitment, and payment of peer researchers. The following section is concerned with how we prepared and supported peer researchers over six weeks of data collection. In the final two sections, we focus on the relevance of research about students' rights to the peer researchers who worked on the project and their perceptions of a peer research methodology. We include an analysis of the 'quality' of the data collected from our perspectives as education researchers. In the final section we revisit our five point rationale in the light of what peer researchers had to say about their research experiences.

Theorising young people as researchers

We argue that childhood and youth are social constructions and that these social constructions influence how we treat young people as research participants and whether we can imagine young people as researchers (Alderson 2000, Christensen

[3] Decile ratings are based on a calculation deriving from: equivalent household income, parents' school qualifications, parents' occupations, families receiving welfare benefits, Maori and Pacific Island students as a percentage of the school roll, and the average number of persons per bedroom. There is debate about the conflation of ethnicity with social class statistics. Given that Maori and Pacific Island people are over-represented in lower socio-economic groups, then this has a compounding effect on the decile rating calculated especially for schools with high proportions of Maori and Pacific Island students.

and James 2000). We understand young people as active participants in creating research knowledge as well as in resisting forms of knowledge researchers might create about them. However, we do not wish to over-emphasise young people's agency within school contexts where structures and adult authority continually shape young people's agency. It is therefore critical to consider both agency and structure together as a constantly interactive process (Rudd and Evans 1998, Ball, Macrae and Maguire 1999, Wyn and Dwyer 1999, 2000, Harris, Aapola and Gonick 2000) that are shaped by the power relations between researcher and researched, teacher and student, and amongst students themselves.

Recruiting and paying peer researchers

The first step in the research process was gaining ethical approval to employ and pay peer researchers for their work. In our application, we described payment as an honorarium in order to avoid implicating peer researchers in additional taxable income if they already had part-time work (given that our offer of employment was temporary and involved only two hours per week for a total of six weeks). Literature on peer research, although limited, indicated the importance of recognising and legitimating the work with payment just as we would for adult researchers (see Alder and Sandor 1990, Kaplun 1995, Alderson 2000).

Students' rights to direct payment of money

In the process of seeking entry to each of the four schools, which was primarily conducted with the principal or senior administrator of each school, the peer research component proved to be an important negotiating feature. For schools who feel overburdened by requests from researchers to conduct research in schools, the proposed invitation for students to participate as researchers, gaining skills, payment, and a reference for their Curriculum Vitae, was considered a positive outcome of students participating in the research.

But the issue of payment did prompt an ethical dilemma at North Urban Co-Ed 1. We argue that it was no accident that of the four schools, proposed payment of students at

the school drawing on a catchment with the lowest socio-economic status, prompted a paternalistic response. The Principal and Senior Administrator agreed to the peer research component on the condition that the money was paid to the school for the peer researchers to use to pay for school related expenses, which was later revised to include the school social function. The rationale offered by these school leaders for such a strategy was concern about what might happen to their money if students took it home.

Such a response is recognisable in broader discourses that have circulated in New Zealand during the 1980s and 1990s, as consecutive neo-liberal governments have adopted social and economic policies that increasingly control, intervene in, and monitor the lives of low-income families, especially incomes derived from welfare benefits (see Atwool 1999, Danaher et al. 2000, Smith and Taylor 2000). These broader discourses are often contradictory because on the one hand, governments require greater accountability and responsibility from welfare dependant families, and on the other hand, intervene in ways that make it impossible for families to maintain a sense of autonomy over their financial affairs.[4]

Upon reflection, however, we felt that in a rights-based project peer researchers' right to direct payment was critical. In our second meeting, we acknowledged the school's best intentions (and implicitly its paternalism) in its desire to 'protect' the students' money, but argued for the importance that the peer research arrangement approximate as closely as possible an employer-employee relationship which includes direct payment to employees. The school accepted our arguments on this occasion, and agreed that students could be paid directly, and the research went ahead. The first author later discussed this issue with the two peer researchers to ascertain their perspectives on this matter, given that we were assuming students would want direct

[4] There is a parallel here with discourses concerning students' rights and responsibilities at school, on the one hand, rights are conceptualised as dependant on students demonstrating that they are responsible first, and on the other hand, schools control students in ways that make it impossible for students to demonstrate responsibility, thereby 'apparently' precluding the possibilities of student rights. The definition of a right, nevertheless, is an entitlement that is not conditional upon responsibilities or anything else for that matter (Franklin 1995, Freeman 1998, Hodgkin & Newell 1998).

payment, and both researchers were pleased that they would receive their money directly. All peer researchers were given a choice of receiving their lump-sum payment at the end of six weeks research as a cheque or as cash; most, but not all, chose cash. It is important to acknowledge that although we had imagined an ideal scenario of direct employment of peer researchers, we also were aware that schools are powerful mediators in any negotiations to carry out research in schools.

Having gained access to conduct the research in all four schools, the next step was to recruit at least two peer researchers in each school from the most senior level in the school (in New Zealand, senior high school students are usually 17-18 years old). We chose this level for two pragmatic reasons. We anticipated that the ethics committee and schools might be more likely to consider employment and payment of senior rather than junior students. Secondly, given our expectations were for students to approach their peers and interview them during school breaks, we thought it might be easier for senior students to approach students younger than themselves than it would be for younger students to approach older students.

Our goal was to find volunteers. We wanted to avoid conventional application and selection processes that might favour articulate students already well-versed in the art of applying for jobs and/or awards, and the possibility of students being chosen by teachers. The first author was a high school geography teacher prior to becoming a researcher and she offered to teach about social science research methods to classes where this might be relevant. Teaching these classes provided an opportunity to also discuss the research project and ask students to consider being peer researchers while providing at least one hour of interaction during which they could check out the researcher they would be working most closely with.

This method was chosen instead of other possible methods of recruitment such as public announcements in assemblies or classrooms by teachers or researchers, or written advertisements in school notices, to enable students to find out more about who they might be working with. Nine students volunteered, two per school with three at one school. There were five female and four male volunteers and both genders were represented in the two co-ed schools. There were four students who

identified as Niuean, Cook Islands, Samoan and Chinese respectively and five students as Pakeha/European.[5] Students were then provided with a one hour training session covering the purpose of the research, the research questions and the two methods of data collection, interviewing and participant observation. Before considering training and on-going support in more detail, it is opportune to consider the students' perspectives of recruitment and payment, conveyed during debriefing interviews conducted after the peer research was complete.

What the peer researchers had to say about recruitment and payment

For two male researchers from North Urban Boys 10, recruitment and payment were inextricably linked:

> Karen: So when I turned up and talked to the Geography class that you are part of, what was the motivation for doing the work?
>
> Male researcher: That's how much a ball ticket costs!
>
> Male researcher: Yeah, it'll get the ball ticket.
>
> Karen: So the actual fact that it was going to be paid was an important part of ...?
>
> Male researcher: That's what sold it.
>
> Male researcher: Yeah. I probably wouldn't have done it if it was for nothing.
>
> Karen: Fair enough.
>
> Male researcher: We've got so much on our plates, there's no way you'd do anything for free this year.
>
> Male researcher: We need the money.
>
> Male researcher: Yeah, I think a lot of guys couldn't be bothered, even for the money. It wasn't worth it for them.

While students at this school were generally from families who were financially well-off, for these two students the research earnings provided the means to purchase their

[5] Pakeha is the Maori term for white New Zealanders although this is contested (see Mohanram, 1998). Like Alton-Lee and Nuthall with Patrick (1993), however, we use the term as a mark of respect for the right of the indigenous people to name those who came after them.

ball tickets.[6] These two students' words validate the importance of payment for peer researchers just as we would expect to recruit adult researchers with the incentive of payment. Freeman, Nairn and Sligo (2003) have argued elsewhere that adult researchers often expect young people to be more altruistic than adults when it comes to giving up their time to take part in research, be consulted by local government, and/or any other initiatives concerned with gaining their perspectives.

While money was important for one female researcher from South Rural Co-Ed 4, the promised reference for students' Curriculum Vitae also represented an incentive:

> And the money, you know, thinking ah yes money's going in this as well, is pretty good as well . . .[and later in the interview] and there was . . .like the CV thing and that sort of thing. I thought 'Ah you know it sounds quite good I must look into that a wee bit more'.

The three peer researchers from the same school offered the following analysis of the recruitment method.

> Karen: just thinking about that method of me coming in and taking a class like that, so there was a wee bit of a chance for you to check me out . . .could there have been another way to have done that?
>
> Male researcher: That was probably the best way of coming in because [interrupted]
>
> Female researcher: You can ask questions.
>
> Male researcher: Yeah. And plus we get to see who you are and stuff like that.
>
> Karen: Because. . .if I'd just written to the school and the teachers stood up and said ah there's a researcher wanting some volunteers, without you even seeing [interrupted]
>
> Male researcher: Yeah they might be scared and thinking ah no. . .
>
> Female researcher: It's better to know exactly what it's about as well.

The importance of "the seen face", that is, presenting "yourself to people face to face" is a well-established Maori protocol that Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 120) identifies as

[6] Peer researchers could earn an honorarium of NZ$120.00 and the cost of a double ball ticket was the same.

important when considering research by and with Maori. We would argue that this protocol has wider application within research (and other) contexts, and in our case, we believe the face-to-face approach to recruitment facilitated a more direct relationship between the peer researchers and the person who would be working most closely with them.

Preparing peer researchers

Training was conducted during a one-off session of one hour that fitted in with the timetable of each of the four schools. There was general agreement during the debriefing interviews with peer researchers that the one-off training session was adequate initially. It was not until students had actually started the research that students had questions. For example a female researcher at South Urban Girls 6, explained that at the beginning: "We weren't sure how to do it. And just sort of making it . . . sure exactly what you want so that we don't feel so insecure about what we're doing". In future, a second session with peer researchers one or two weeks after data collection had started, or on-going meetings at key points throughout the research process, could be arranged depending on peer researchers' needs.

We attempted on-going training and support from a distance by phone with the first author making regular weekly contact by phone with each peer researcher in the evening and providing a toll-free number for peer researchers to contact her daytime and evenings. These strategies met with varying levels of enthusiasm, ranging from those researchers who said it was good to have this opportunity available to those who knew this support existed but saw no need to call on it. For example, one female researcher preferred support by phone (instead of via email) because:

> some things it would be easier just to talk over rather than write it down and try and explain it, it could be something that's better explained by talking and you might need the answer right then sort of thing, instead of waiting for an email to come back (South Rural Co-Ed 4).

But at the other end of the continuum, when asked if they had enough support, one male researcher said "I didn't think we needed any" (North Urban Boys 10) and one

female researcher commented: "I didn't really need support I don't reckon. You just do it all yourself" (South Rural Co-Ed 4).

Training was provided in relation to two research methods: interviewing and participant observation. These methods were chosen because they did not depend on technology and were therefore relatively transportable around school grounds and buildings where we expected peer researchers to interview and observe their peers during school-breaks. We did not expect students to tape-record interviews; instead all they needed to conduct interviews were information pamphlets about the research, consent forms, the research questions and a notebook for recording interview responses and observations in. These notes would then be collated and it was expected they would be posted in at the end of each week although this did not always happen.

Despite these efforts to provide on-going support over six weeks of data collection, peer researchers had differing understandings of what was required of them, differing levels of engagement with the research topic, and differing experiences of being researchers. The debriefing interview with the peer researchers from each school provided a rich source of data about what did and did not work for the peer researchers. While this debriefing interview came at the end of the process, and therefore too late to change things for this particular group of peer researchers, their perspectives provide valuable insights for other researchers considering this methodology.

"What was it like being a peer researcher?" Re-evaluating research agendas

The two male peer researchers from North Urban Boys 10 were generally unenthusiastic about their experience of being researchers. For example, in response to my opening question: "what was it like being a peer researcher", they said:

> Male researcher 1: Not too bad aye.
> Male researcher 2: Nah. Basically just the usual.

This is not only evident in their words but was also conveyed via their tone of voice during the interview itself. But these students were clear that it was the kind of work

they were familiar with: "it was just like school work really, it just wasn't riveting or whatever". These two male students illustrate 'unenthusiastic masculinity'. Similarly, there were glimpses of 'unenthusiastic masculinity' in the comments of the male peer researcher from South Rural Co-Ed 4:

> Yeah I thought it was pretty, ah it was alright. Just a, it seems I didn't have much time for it [laughs]. Like I'd always forget about it and then it will pop up just near the end of the week. So I'd have to do it quickly but, no it wasn't too bad.

Other researchers have documented how it is often difficult for male students to have social credibility and appear to be enthusiastic about school and school-like work (Jackson 2002, Connell 1989, 1995) so we were not surprised that three (out of four) male researchers appeared to be less enthusiastic than their female counterparts. Four (out of five) female peer researchers were more enthusiastic both in their words and voice tones, for example:

> Yeah because there're aspects that we as 7th formers may not see. And it was interesting to get to know what other people around the school think of it (South Urban Girls 6).

> Once you sort of sat down and concentrated on, it was like you know quite a lot of fun doing the interviews with people and that sort of thing (South Rural Co-Ed 4).

But these gender patterns did not hold in all instances. For example, at North Urban Co-Ed 1, the male researcher's actions could be interpreted as an indication of enthusiasm, even though he was not overtly enthusiastic in the spoken text of the debriefing interview. He showed enthusiasm and initiative in the following ways: he put the interview questions into a questionnaire format in order to record responses directly and more easily, produced separate reports of the female and male data and initiated one phone call to me on the toll-free number. In contrast, the actions of his female counterpart and another female researcher at the other Co-Ed school, could be interpreted as less enthusiastic or perhaps just less well-organised. These two female students needed the most prompting to get their research notes posted in.

While an analysis of gender patterns might offer one lens for considering relative levels of enthusiasm or engagement with the research agenda, another analysis is prompted if we focus on the dialogue with the two peer researchers from North Urban Co-Ed 1. The following dialogue indicates a mis-match between the research agenda of the authors and the relevance or familiarity of a rights discourse to students at this school, where a large proportion of the students are from the Pacific Islands. The male researcher was Cook Island Maori and the female researcher was Niuean.

> Karen: what was it like being a peer researcher?
>
> female: It was hard.
>
> male: Yeah.
>
> Karen: What was hard about it?
>
> female: . . . And the little ones, it's hard too coz, they don't understand it, and it takes up like half an hour of your lunchtime explaining it.
>
> Karen: Yeah I think it is quite hard to explain. How did you find it. . . [addressing male researcher]
>
> male: To the newer ones, it was hard for them too, they didn't understand it. *So I just changed it around. Oh, just a bit, changed it around.*[7]
>
> Karen: Which is good actually, that's what I wanted you to do, you know, try and put it in their words. So when you say the young ones. . .?
>
> Both: No, the fourth formers.
>
> female: *Especially those who came from the island, it's really hard.*
>
> male: *Yeah, coz they can't speak English properly, so we just help out.*
>
> Karen: So when you say it was quite hard to explain, is it the idea of rights, having rights, is that quite hard to explain?
>
> female: *Yeah, coz they like, they've never come across it. The rights.*

The female researcher points out that the concept of rights was not a familiar one for many Pacific Island students. If the concept of rights is not familiar, it does not necessarily mean it is not relevant. Nevertheless, these peer researchers' comments

[7] Italicised sections of quoted transcript indicate particular phrases that are important. We have included this footnote rather than note 'emphasis added' in each instance.

prompted us to question the cross-cultural appropriateness of a concept of rights that is generally conveyed as an 'individual entitlement' for young people from cultures where there are more collective forms of social arrangements, and differing constructions of the role of children and/or of the meaning of rights (Freeman 1998, Tagaloa 2000, Park et al. 2002). A mis-match between the research agendas of Pakeha researchers (as in our case) and what counts as meaningful questions for Pacific Island research participants risks rendering these participants as not knowledgeable and therefore disempowered (Jones 1999). This is not their fault, rather it is the responsibility of researchers to design relevant and appropriate research agendas. These two students had suggestions for an alternative research agenda, in response to the following question:

> K: What kind of research do you think students here [at this school] would be most interested in? Like if you were doing some research about something …?
>
> Male researcher: Music.
>
> Female researcher: Sports.
>
> Male researcher: *Cultures. Something that's up to date.*
>
> Karen: So can you imagine asking some questions around this school about music or cultures?
>
> Both: Mmhmm.
>
> Karen: And having more interest maybe?
>
> Both: Yeah.

We had imagined that research about students' participation, recreation, safety and health rights at school would have had relevance and indeed the research agenda suggested by these students is about rights too, that is, music and sports are both examples of recreation rights and the reference to "cultures" could be interpreted as being about their rights to cultural integrity (see for example Articles 2, 7, 8, 30, 31, UNCROC 1999). Nevertheless, whether this indicates potential common-ground or a co-option of their suggestions to our agenda, the issue remains that these two researchers and the students they interviewed did not always find 'rights' interesting, relevant and/or meaningful.

Ideally peer researchers, and young people, could be involved more in formulating the research agenda, deciding on the research questions, and the methods most appropriate for data collection. This ideal is compromised by the requirement of our university ethics committee that research with human participants does not begin until ethics approval is gained. This in effect precludes the possibility of any group, young people included, being involved in designing research projects prior to funding and ethics applications. Adult researchers get to consult young people *after* research questions and methodologies have been designed and ethically approved. Ironically, such a process compromises the possibilities of catering more fully for the participation and cultural rights of young people in research.

Nevertheless, both peer researchers at this school attempted to make the research more relevant for their research participants by re-wording research questions "I just changed it around. Oh, just a bit, changed it around". Although it could be debated as to whether research agendas that are irrelevant or unfamiliar to the group of people being researched should be pursued, it is clear from the peer researchers' comments that they attempted to make the research more relevant and therefore more ethical.

Re-evaluating the peer research methodology

While it is clear that there were issues to do with the relevance of the research agenda, the peer researchers generally acknowledged the appropriateness of the peer research methodology. The two researchers from North Urban Co-Ed 1 pointed out that students at their school would probably ignore and/or actively avoid an adult researcher at their school, and this provides an important justification for involving peer researchers.

> Karen: So did anyone kind of make fun of you or the research, saying "Oh, what! What's this?"
>
> male: No. Coz we explained it, what's it for.
>
> Karen: That's something that is a really important part of you doing it, whereas can you imagine what it would be like if it was me here at school?
>
> female: *They'd ignore you.*

male: *try and get away*

The three researchers from South Urban Co-Ed 4 made a similar point, indicating that it was not just the age of the researcher that matters but that there were advantages of peer researchers being 'insiders' of the community where the research was conducted.

> Female: I reckon it's better if you get the students from within the school to ask because if you get, even if you get people our age from outside the schools it just makes it a wee bit tougher *because you're like kind of alien*. It's not always, I don't know, some people don't always like want to talk to new people and strange people, sort of thing.

But the comments of two researchers from South Urban Girls 6 remind us of how it is more nuanced than this, because these senior students acknowledged they were not necessarily peers to junior students, and that there are many differences between the experiences of older and younger students.

> . . . you wouldn't usually think what a third former thinks about the school but when we you know interview them we actually got to know what a lot of them thought about it and you know you realise that *it's a lot different to what you think* . . .

This is also evident in the comments made by the two researchers from North Urban Co-Ed 1 (already quoted, pages 12-13), as well as by the two researchers from North Urban Boys 10:

> It was just hard to get some of them to take you seriously kind of thing. *Coz you are not an adult.*
>
> Karen: But . . .imagine if it was me, an adult, turned up to actually ask the same questions . . .?
>
> You'd probably get a lot more matter of fact sort of . . . *you'd get the facts. Whereas we get more the opinions and sort of what they actually feel as opposed to what happens.*
>
> K: So what's your sense of why . . .?
>
> For the peer/adult reason. Probably the exact reason why you got us to do it.

These two male researchers acknowledged that they were not taken seriously by more junior students, although they noticed that their role as researchers was more credible when they were recording in their notebooks. They go on to explain that an adult researcher would probably be taken more seriously but caution that the information provided to peer and adult researchers would be qualitatively different.

The peer researchers' words presented here demonstrate their critical assessment of the peer research methodology, and this is supported by other data from the debriefing interviews. It is possible to argue, like the peer researchers themselves, that although this methodology has relevance it also has its problems, both ethical and practical. What is important is that researcher reflexivity is an integral part of peer research methodology so that lessons learnt from one research project might help inform the design of our own, and others', future research projects.

Finally, in our evaluation of the methodology, it seems important to consider the data collected from our perspectives as education researchers. Just as there were differing levels of engagement with the research, the quality of the data collected differed. It might not even be appropriate to expect 'good' qualitative data from researchers provided with one hour of training and approximately twelve hours of data collection during which to prove themselves. In this instance we are defining 'good' qualitative data as a peer researcher's ability to obtain data that constituted more than 'yes/no' or superficial responses to interview questions.

Leaving aside a fuller debate about what counts as 'good' qualitative data, three of the nine students collected very good data (all female students, two Pakeha and one Chinese, two from South Urban Girls 6 and one from South Rural Co-Ed 4). In particular the Chinese student from the all-girls' school facilitated and collected outstanding data.[8] All three students were also overtly enthusiastic about the research process during the debriefing interview.

Other peer researchers, while enthusiastic in their words and/or actions, did not collect such detailed data, that is, their data was superficial and often without elaboration.

[8] This student is now at university and the first author has employed her on another research project.

This was the case for the data collected by the male researcher from North Urban Co-Ed 1 even though he had shown initiative in the way he recorded the data, as well as that collected by one of the female researchers from South Rural Co-Ed 4, despite her stated interest in her interviewees' differing ways of thinking. For the remaining four researchers (two males from North Urban Boys 10, one male from South Rural Co-Ed 4 and one female from North Urban Co-Ed 1), they were less overtly enthusiastic during the debriefing interview and the data collected was relatively superficial and unelaborated. While only a third of the peer researchers produced 'good' data, we would argue that a peer research methodology is still 'worth it' for three reasons. First we believe as adult researchers we could not have obtained this particular data about young people's perspectives, and even the more superficial data is use-able and/or informative in its own way. Second we know that even experienced researchers do not always collect good, elaborated data (we are speaking for ourselves) and this should be taken into account when adopting a peer research methodology. Third, being a good qualitative researcher is not solely dependant on hours spent training, learning skills and interviewing, but more reliant on an enquiring mind, and an ability to listen and relate to research participants.

Concluding comments

A critical assessment of the ethics and politics of one attempt to include young people as researchers, runs the risk of implying that there are more problems than advantages to a peer research methodology. In this article we have focussed more on the problems than the advantages because we think it is important to provide a critically reflexive rather than a descriptive account in order to contribute to the on-going development of this research methodology.

For any researcher working with children and young people, we believe the five arguments presented in the opening section of this article provide a powerful rationale. We now revisit these arguments, first made in our ethics application, in light of the peer researchers' perspectives highlighted in this article. First, while the model of peer research we adopted in this project about students' rights, did not go far enough to cater for young people's participation rights, it did represent a useful starting point. We identified the impossibility of conducting research with young

people where they might more actively shape research agendas, questions and appropriate methodologies, when university ethics committees require that these very things be determined and ethical standards evaluated in advance of any contact with human participants. Despite this important constraint for our project, we would argue that peer researchers participated, critically evaluated their experience, received payment and a reference, and in some cases stated they enjoyed being researchers.

Second, researchers understood that respondents generally felt more at ease, and gave qualitatively different responses to interviewers from their peer group (Victorian Youth Advocacy Network 1990, cited in Alder and Sandor, 1990) but were clear that this was not uniformly the case. Just as Dyck (1997) found that matching interviewers to respondents on the basis of ethnicity, in order to increase the likelihood that respondents felt comfortable, did not work in every case, the same can be argued in relation to matching on the basis of age. Young people are not a homogeneous group and even matching interviewers more carefully across the stratification of age will not necessarily ensure complete ease even for same-aged peers, particularly as there is more than age to take account of. While there was evidence that the two Pacific Island peer researchers did important work in translating our research agenda for Pacific Island respondents and that their understanding of their respondents would have derived from shared knowledge across diverse Pacific Island ethnicities, they still acknowledged how these responses were shaped by age and how recently their respondents had migrated to New Zealand.

Third, we stand by our claim that peer research is a form of "political action" , a challenge to dominant stereotypes of young people (Hill 1994, cited in Kaplun 1995: 9). We valued young people's contribution to the research, the data they collected *and* their critical assessment of the methodology. The process reaffirmed our expectations of young people as active participants in creating, *and resisting*, research knowledge. The data presented in this article indicates students who were whole-hearted participants as well as those who might be understood as more resistant to the research agenda and met minimum expectations so they were eligible for payment.

Fourth, for some of the peer researchers, their skills were extended and they demonstrated their skills for critical analysis of this particular research experience (Harris 2001). The particular skills that young people already had and developed further were the subject of the reference written for each researcher. Finally, while a thorough analysis of the benefits accruing to the peer researchers themselves deserves a separate article, we can claim on the basis of evidence presented here that not only was payment and a reference important, but that researchers gained skills and learnt a great deal about their peers and their schools. We finish with the words of some of the peer researchers to indicate the depth of learning and the insightful ways they conveyed this:

North Urban Co-Ed 1

Karen: Did you feel like you learnt some skills, you know, that whole thing of getting people to talk?

Both: Yep.

Male researcher: *Yeah, listening. Like they are teaching us as well, like their culture.*

Female researcher: *And they are telling us about themselves.*

South Urban Girls 6

Female researcher: I think it was quite good like seeing what other people thought about things and yeah, getting the opportunity to interact with people that you might not usually do stuff with and, you know like, I did a lot of third formers and actually knowing, finding out what they thought about things.

South Rural Co-Ed 4

Female researcher: Just like, it's like finding out how people's minds work I think. I'm quite into that at the moment but like just finding out the way people think because like some people think straight along the lines of sport . . . but other people have like heaps wider views of thought.

In these students' words, we recognised some of our own motivations for being researchers, and felt that that such insights from the peer researchers provided a valuable testimony to the worth of working with young people as researchers.

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